‘People can be smarter with two languages’: Changing attitudes to language learning through teaching linguistics

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With the ever mounting status of English as undisputed global lingua franca, there is long standing concern among pedagogues and policy makers in many Anglophone countries (US, UK, Australia, New Zealand) over the lack of interest in, and uptake of, language learning. In the UK, significant changes in language education policy, a mentality of insularity, and the phenomenon of Global English have all contributed to a sharp drop in language learning uptake beyond the compulsory stage. While the UK has seen many initiatives aiming to foster language learning, such as Routes into Languages (a Government-funded university consortium working with (mostly secondary) schools to run programmes focusing on employability and language skills), no studies so far have aimed to change learner attitudes by broadening students’ sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic knowledge about languages, focusing on a) the ubiquity of multilingualism in the world and b) cognitive effects of language learning. As part of the research reported here, a research-based teaching intervention designed to raise secondary school students’ awareness of multilingualism and change students’ attitudes, was administered to 97 students in Year 8 & Year 9 (aged 13-14) in three different state schools in England and Scotland. A questionnaire measuring attitudes towards multilingualism and language learning, closely tailored to the content of the intervention, was administered one week before and one to two weeks after the intervention, and differences measured. In addition, qualitative student feedback was gathered after the intervention, and analysed. Results show significant changes, across the cohort, in two out of three constructs (quantitative), and effects on students’ thinking about language learning (qualitative). In conclusion, the results suggest that pedagogical interventions which foreground cognitive effects of language learning and global linguistic issues positively influence Anglophone language learners’ attitudes towards language learning.

Keywords: metalinguistic knowledge, motivation, Anglophone learners.